

## Experience Counts

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A few years ago, I was living with a friend in Westminster, Calif., and we both had motocross motorcycles. I'd sold my Honda 550 street bike before I moved to California and normally drove my pickup to get around. My friend, however, used his Honda 750 as his primary transportation. While I'd become familiar with the area during the three months I'd lived there, I didn't care too much for the congested roads.

My friend and I would occasionally trade vehicles when he worked third shift at the Long Beach refinery. The ride to Long Beach could be chilly and he didn't care for riding after dark. One day I was headed home on his motorcycle when I decided to stop and wash the bike. Just as I finished, it began to drizzle. The rain got heavier and completely soaked the streets as I rode home, but I wasn't concerned. I'd motocross raced in the rain when I lived in Michigan and had plenty of experience riding on wet roads. I was more concerned about the rain ruining my wash job!

I was near Disneyland and heading west when I approached a set of entrance and exit ramps for Interstate 5. Before crossing the interstate, I had to stop for a red light at an intersection. As I did, I pulled up between two stopped cars, which is legal in California, and waited for the light to change. When the light turned green, I checked traffic and entered the intersection. I pulled in front of the cars beside me and eased into the left lane. Just ahead, an approaching Mercedes moved into its left-turn lane to take the onramp for northbound I-5.

I checked my mirrors for traffic and when I looked forward, I saw the Mercedes stopped halfway across my lane. "No big deal," I thought as I rolled off the throttle, checked the right lane, turned on my signal and began moving over. I was shocked when the Mercedes suddenly pulled forward, stopped and blocked both lanes!

It seemed everything was happening in slow motion, but I didn't panic. I contemplated laying the bike down to avoid either going over the Mercedes' hood or trying to jump the huge curbs. I thought I could just barely miss the Mercedes, so that's what I chose to do. I was in a good motocross "attack" position—a slight crouch, my elbows up and feet squarely on the pegs. I was on both brakes and downshifting when the bike's rear tire broke traction. I eased off the brakes to avoid sliding and got on the binders again.

I almost made it but ended up hitting the Mercedes' front fender. I lifted my left leg to protect it from the impact and managed to keep the bike from going down. My thinking sped up to real time again and my first thought was, "This guy is going to run!" When I tried to downshift and turn around, I realized the shifter and foot peg were missing and the engine sounded terrible. I stopped, put the kickstand down and started running toward the Mercedes.

When the driver stepped out his first words were, "Why didn't you go around me?" By then I'd gotten over my initial shock and had my finger and most of my helmet in his face. Then I heard someone yelling at me. A witness gave me his card and said he couldn't believe I'd stayed on the bike. Apparently, my rear tire had lifted three or so feet off the ground.

I called my friend and told him what happened when the California Highway Patrol officer that was taking statements approached me laughing. He told me the Mercedes driver claimed the accident was my fault! The Honda tore a six-inch piece of rubber off the Mercedes' front bumper, but that bumper sheared the Honda's left foot peg and shifter and smashed the engine's left case. When it came to crunching metal, the Mercedes won hands-down.

However, wasn't I the real winner here? After all, I was still standing completely intact after the accident. I believe what saved me that day was five years' experience in American Motorcyclist Association-sanctioned motocross races. That experience helped me react calmly and think through my options up to the moment of impact. The skills I'd learned on dirt tracks were there when I needed them on the highway. The motocross attack position helped me stay centered on the bike and ready to jump off if needed.

Experience beats improvisation, which is one reason the AMA promotes motocross racing as one of the cheapest ways to gain good, perhaps even life-saving, skills. If you're interested, check out the AMA's Web site at <http://www.ama-cycle.org>. There you'll get information on training, gear and where



to race. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation also offers its DirtBike School™ for riders interested in off-road biking. For more information, visit the school's Web site at <http://www.dirtbikeschool.com>.

While personal protective equipment can help protect you from injuries during a crash, nothing beats experience for helping you avoid or at least reduce the actual impact. Ride with experience to ride safe!

## Did You Know?

Three out of four workers drive alone to work. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "Among the 128.3 million workers in the United States in 2000, 76 percent drove alone to work. In addition, 12 percent carpooled, 4.7 percent used public transportation, 3.3 percent worked at home, 2.9 percent walked to work and 1.2 percent used other means (including motorcycle or bicycle)." More facts on transportation can be found at the U.S. Census Bureau Web site at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-33.pdf>.